

How Much Money Did the NYPD Waste Quashing Student Protests? We Tallied It Up.

Bryce Covert : 7-9 minutes : 5/7/2024

In the early hours of April 30, Columbia University President Minouche Shafik [announced](#) that negotiations with student protesters had failed. She ordered the students, who were demanding that the school divest from Israel, to disband their encampments and end their protests.

Instead, students occupied Hamilton Hall. They renamed the building — which has a [long history](#) of occupations — Hind's Hall in honor of Hind Rajab, a 6-year-old Palestinian girl who was killed in the Gaza Strip by Israeli forces after calling for help in January.

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That evening, at Shafik's request, the New York City Police Department stormed the campus for the second time in two weeks. Hundreds of officers in riot gear [showed up](#) around 8 p.m., violently mass arresting students, and stayed until at least midnight, when the university said the area had been cleared.

Mayor Eric Adams has [called](#) for Columbia to foot some of the bill, but New York City residents are, for now, the ones paying for that violent evening. Based on estimates of the size of the police force and the cost per officer, New York spent at least \$200,000 on overtime alone for the four-hour raid to clear Hamilton Hall, according to an analysis by The Intercept.

“Every dollar that we spend on policing, especially policing that is suppressing our constitutional rights in a democracy, is an affront against so many New Yorkers who are in desperate need for economic and social support,” said Jawanza Williams, director of organizing at VOCAL-NY, a community activist group. “The administration has a totally flipped, upside-down perspective when it comes to what should be a priority in the city's spending and the city's budget.”

Two hundred thousand dollars may not sound like much, but Williams pointed out that it could, for example, be used staff up the city's housing discrimination office or even help families stay housed themselves.

The cost of the crackdown — part of a wider NYPD dragnet against Gaza protests — is likely to increase exponentially, especially as protests continue to grow. Large numbers of police can now be seen at most of the daily protests popping up around the city. (The NYPD did not respond to a request for comment.)

Based on past protests, the fiscal toll of the NYPD's response could easily reach nine figures. Policing of the 2020 George Floyd protests in New York ended up costing the city nearly \$150 million in overtime alone — with tens of millions, and counting, in additional settlement payouts in [police abuse lawsuits](#).

Overtime in Overdrive

To make its estimate for the cost of the size of the police force bearing down on Columbia's campus, The Intercept used public eyewitness accounts, publicly available photo evidence, and software tools for estimating crowd size.

Carla Mende, a graduate student who filmed what happened with a documentary team and [recounted her experience](#) to the Columbia Spectator, counted about 500 officers rushing by her. A crowd

estimation tool counts nearly 200 officers in two [Getty photos](#) of helmeted police swarming the campus. At least 90 officers can be seen in [footage](#) of police climbing an armored police vehicle with a ramp on top to enter Hamilton Hall.

The cost of paying NYPD overtime, on average, is \$100 per hour per officer, according to an estimate given to The Intercept by the New York City Comptroller's Office. That means the hundreds of police who showed up at Columbia that night cost New York City hundreds of thousands of dollars in overtime.

Just going by the Mende's estimate of 500 officers, the city spent \$200,000 to clear Hamilton Hall — and that doesn't count the officers who [stayed around](#) after Columbia declared the campus cleared, the use of military-style equipment, or other costs for the massive police mobilization.

Shafik [requested](#) that NYPD officers stay on campus from April 30 through May 17.

One student who was arrested that night [told](#) student-run radio station WKCR that police taunted the student protesters by telling them about all the overtime they were making.

Millions in Payouts

The April 30 raid on Columbia was just one of a series of recent crackdowns in which police stormed onto New York City college campuses. That same evening, [according](#) to Hell Gate, "hundreds" of officers flooded onto the City College of New York's campus and [violently disbanded](#) its encampment. "Well over" 100 cops showed up to disband an encampment at the New School in the early hours of May 3, [according](#) to the university's Students for Justice in Palestine chapter.

In total, the NYPD has arrested [nearly 500](#) people at Columbia, CCNY, Fordham University, the New School, and New York University so far.

The cost of sending NYPD streaming onto college campuses will have to be absorbed by a city budget already under harsh austerity measures imposed by Adams. In September, he told all city agencies to absorb a 15 percent cut after imposing [multiple rounds](#) of cuts in 2022.

Public libraries have [already eliminated](#) Sunday service, and they've [warned](#) they'll soon be forced to cut Saturday service as well. Schools that lost enrollment in the pandemic are [at risk](#) of losing funding. The city's free preschool program for 3-year-olds is getting [hollowed out](#). The city's drop-off compost sites are [permanently closing](#) this month. In his April budget, Adams restored some of the slashed funding, but not all. Among the big-ticket items that the mayor reinstated funding for was money for [new classes of police](#).

Meanwhile, the cost of the current crackdown is only going to grow. The last large-scale NYPD protest crackdown cost the city 1,000 times more than what The Intercept estimates police spent raiding colleges on April 30.

In 2020, when protests over the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor erupted over the summer, huge police forces violently suppressed them. It [cost](#) the city \$145.7 million in overtime, pushing total NYPD overtime costs to \$721 million in 2020, up from \$600 million the year before. The figure was the highest number Comptroller Brad Lander's office documented between 2013 and 2022.

The cost of police overtime also doesn't account for what the city will have to pay out when protesters sue over mistreatment, as they are likely to do.

The NYPD's response to the 2020 protests resulted in a [\\$13.7 million](#) settlement for attacking protesters and a [\\$7 million](#) settlement for [kettling them](#). Individual lawsuits added [another \\$12 million](#) in costs as of last summer.

Other large protests, even one-offs, have led to massive legal settlements. The police response to the 2004 Republican National Convention in Manhattan resulted in a \$10.3 million settlement paid to protesters and \$7.6 million spent on lawyers' fees.

The city has paid [more than \\$500 million](#) in [misconduct settlements](#) over the last six years.